

# 9. Two or Three Things I Know about Him

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Everyone will tell you that I am not a musician. That is true. From the very start of my career I immediately classed myself among the *phonométrographes*. My works are pure *phonometrics*. Take *Fils des Étoiles*, the *Morceaux en forme de poire*, *En habit de cheval*, the *Sarabandes*: one perceives that no musical idea presided over the creation of these works. It is scientific thought that prevails. (Satie, 2010)

Erik Satie's *Mémoires d'un amnésique* begin this way (Satie, 2010). I think Alberto Seassaro would have liked to sign on to such an assertion, by an innovative, irreverent Dadaist who was anything but naive, merely substituting designer for *musicien* and lighting technology for *phonométrie*. He would tell it while sporting, with a slightly *blasé* air, one of his inimitable narrow crocheted ties and a jacket whose pockets were so crammed with pencils and markers as to seem a miracle of the laws of statics. I well remember one of the young up-and-coming professors who, in the 1980s, frequented the legendary rooms of Via Bonardi, home of the PPPE department – from which begins the long

story destined to culminate in the birth of the Faculty of Design – slyly remarking that dressed like that he would never be made full professor.

And I also recall never having heard Alberto claim to be a designer: for this very reason it could only be he who founded the first Faculty of Design in Italy. Without renouncing, like Satie, leading us astray, letting us believe he was an anarchist, adopting a breezy tone even on the most important occasions while at the same time maintaining a subtle sense of institutions, coupled with the ability never to lose sight of every small detail of the world around him so as to inscribe it within the design he had in mind.

To understand better, one needs to take a step back. On September 7, 2020, *Domusweb* published a short piece of mine entitled *In ricordo di Alberto Seassaro, padre della Facoltà del design del Politecnico di Milano* [In memory of Alberto Seassaro, father of the Faculty of Design at Politecnico di Milano] <sup>1</sup>, in which I maintain that the January 1970 document entitled *Proposta per la definizione di una Area di ricerca tecnologica nella Facoltà di Architettura di Milano* [Proposal for the definition of a technological research area in the Faculty of Architecture of Milan] (Crespi, Fiori, Zanuso, Seassaro, 1970) – also signed by Raffaella Crespi, Leonardo Fiori, and Marco Zanuso, but certainly written by Alberto Seassaro <sup>1</sup> – contains, in embryonic form, many of the ideas destined to guide the path toward the birth of the Faculty of Design. I am still convinced of this. By

that date, Alberto Seassaro had graduated in Architecture in 1964 and had carried out investigations on prefabrication and building unification for both national research bodies such as the CNR and companies of great prestige such as Montecatini Edison, for which he conducted studies and design exper-

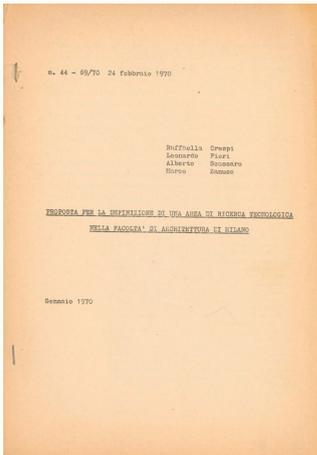


1. Luciano Crespi, **In ricordo di Alberto Seassaro, padre della Facoltà del Design del Politecnico di Milano. Document** →



**Note 1.**  
The document, in fact, is preceded by other documents of similar content signed solely by Alberto Seassaro (cf. Seassaro, 1969 and 1970).

2. Proposta per la  
definizione di una area di  
Ricerca tecnologica nella  
Facoltà di Architettura di  
Milano.  
[Document](#)→



**Note 2.**

Also from 1967 is Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*. She is Paris; the movie's principal aim is to understand not how society can be changed, but how one can live with it.

iments on building components. Fundamental to his training was his collaboration with Giuseppe Ciribini, a leading figure in the technological area, for whom he served as assistant in Turin before becoming a professor in Milan at the end of the 1960s. In those same years he drafted several documents aimed at discussion of the establishment of a disciplinary area of Technology within the Faculties of Architecture, among which this very one cited (*ibidem*) [23](#).

The document opens by denouncing the stalemate in which *experimentation* finds itself, the process of disciplinary refoundation set in motion within the Faculty starting in 1967 [24](#) and centered on a didactic model that envisages replacing monodisciplinary courses with Research Groups. A stalemate due «not only to the insufficient radicality of application» of the model and «to the mystification with which the faculty chose to interpret it, but also and above all to the superficiality with which it was expressed and proposed» (*ibidem*).

In the face of the advanced degradation of disciplinary standards in the Italian university, and in particular in the Faculties of architecture, the document calls for a choice between two models of training: between a school as a center for preparing the new «political aristocracy, future class of bureaucrats» and «a mass school, functional to society as a whole, in the perspective of class struggle» (*ibidem*). I consider the latter point crucial.

In 1970, as a result of the liberalization of access to the university following the student protests, the student population at Politecnico di Milano had risen to about 6,500 students. The document highlights how this datum, together with the ongoing general process of the *proletarianization of intellectuals*, was destined to produce, in particular, a loss of decision-making power for the figure of the architect, owing also to the presence, within the process of territorial production, of other actors more functional to the system and destined to relegate that figure ever more to marginal roles. The response offered by experimentation to the problem is deemed polarized around two mirror-image attitudes, both inadequate: the one that leads to rejecting the discipline, considered the patrimony of the ruling class, and the one bent on its *academization*.

The solutions proposed in the document are arranged on two planes: on the political plane, with the goal of creating a structural – not *superstructural* – relationship between technicians and the working class in the struggle to lay bare the intertwining among science, technology, and their capitalist use; on the ethical plane – yet also functional to improving the teaching offer – through opposition to professionalism (understood both as the use, by the instructor, of the university to promote their own professional activity, and as the transformation of teaching into a vehicle for transmitting the technical and instrumental patrimony proper to professional practice) and through disciplinary refoundation via *the negation of* «disciplinary dequalification and the construction of a mass pedagogy for an alternative clientage» (ibidem). The concluding paragraph of the document, entitled *Ruolo politico della tecnologia* [Political Role of Technology], begins from an examination of the relation between theory and architectural praxis in the postwar period; it denounces the inability of the most authoritative components of design culture to grasp the «crisis of architecture as a crisis of confidence in the clientage that generates this discipline» (ibidem) and proposes, also within Schools of Architecture, a critical examination of the role of technology and of the notions of *technological rationality* and *rationalizing waste*, of Habermasian derivation <sup>32</sup>. The aim is a general revision of technological instruction, capable of conferring on it the character of a *globalizing discipline* and of filling the void left by architectural culture through its choice, on the one hand, to operate predominantly at the scale of the city, and, on the other, to aspire to a «pure formal research devoid of technological concerns» (ibidem). In this scenario, architectural technology is defined as «the study of problems that pertain to all the technical processes capable of making physically perceptible the image of space understood as the place of human activities at the various scales» (ibidem). In this part of the document one finds concepts set out on several other occasions by Marco Zanuso (Grignolo, 2013; Crespi, Tedeschi, Viati, 2020; Zanuso, 1987) and present in the research previously carried out by Alberto Seassaro on industrialized components (Seassaro, 1969; AA.VV., 1971). The document falls within the historical period 1969/1971, in which Alberto Seassaro was part, with Crespi, Fiori,

**Note 3.**  
Especially in the more political parts of all the documents, there are frequent references to economists of the the Manifesto milieu rather than to the workerist culture heir to *Quaderni rossi* [Red Notebooks] of Raniero Panzieri, represented by Mario Tronti and Sergio Bologna, who, as I seem to recall, taught for a time in the Faculty of Architecture.

and Zanuso, of the technological research group within the Institute of Architectural Composition in Milan and was an appointed professor in Milan, after being Giuseppe Ciribini's assistant in Turin. I did not have much occasion to work with him, owing to my stronger political affinities with the *Città fabbrica* [City-factory] research group of Magnaghi, Perelli, Sarfatti, and Stevan, in whose activities I took part, and subsequently with the group of Bianca Bottero and Giorgio Gaetani. When in 1974 I graduated, my supervisor was Cesare Stevan, not officially, since he was among the professors whose appointment had been revoked by the Technical Committee. I do not recall who signed the degree document at the last moment in his stead; such was the climate.

The 1970s were years of normalization. In the a.y. 1977/1978 the Faculty adopted as the unifying theme of instruction the ambit *Abitazioni, classi sociali e territorio* [Housing, Social Classes, and Territory], regarded as of great social relevance and capable of addressing the educational demand of new social actors destined to intervene in the country's realities. It was structured on the basis of thematic strands, each articulated into Didactic Units. Seassaro, confirmed appointed professor of *Architectural Technology*, is present in Thematic Strand 2, *Processi produttivi per l'edilizia* [Production Processes for Building], with the Didactic Unit *Cronaca tecnologica degli anni '60* [Technological Chronicle of the 1960s], and also in Thematic Strand 3, whose instructors, refusing to label themselves with titles in which they did not recognize themselves (in the parcelling out of the strands it was to have been the strand of the *bisognisti*, proponents of a needs-based approach), prefer to call themselves *Il privato è politico* [the personal is political]. His Didactic Unit *La casa alternativa* [The Alternative House] provides for a critique of the ideology of inhabiting and the calling into question of all the commonplaces with which architecture had contented itself, so as to obtain a renewed practice of designing.

The 1980s represent the *incubation* period of the idea of the Faculty of Design. Seassaro, together with Fabrizio Schiaffonati, was the driving force behind all the cultural and institutional initiatives that would lead to the establishment of the *Istituto di Tecnologia dell'architettura* [Institute of Architectural Technology] at Politecnico di Milano, informally taking on directing duties until the 1979 election of Fabrizio Schiaffonati, who in the meantime had become Full Professor;

from 1979 to 1981 he was director of the CNR National Group for Building Production, Rome; in 1980 he promoted the establishment of the *Gruppo Nazionale Produzione Edilizia del CNR* [CNR National Group for Building Production], which he chaired until 1984, serving on the Scientific Council until 1994. From 1981 to 1989 he was President of the *Consiglio di Indirizzo Tecnologico del CdL in Architettura* [Technological Track Council of the Degree Course in Architecture] at Politecnico di Milano. It was within this *primordial broth* that the conditions took shape to institute first the Degree Course and then the Faculty of Design. When I was brought into the research by Fabrizio Schiaffonati, at the beginning of the 1980s, the Technological Area was acquiring its own identity, ratified by two conferences, in 1984 and 1987. In 1984 Marco Zanuso became Full Professor of *Industrial Design*, after nearly ten years teaching *Progettazione artistica per l'industria* [Artistic Design for Industry]. Cesare Stevan states:

**1984 was the final step: thus the idea took hold of having a Degree Track in order to promote a Degree Course in Industrial Design. Another ten years passed before realization, from '84 to '93, and almost as many again to reach the outcome I had hoped for, a Faculty of Design. I hoped for this not only in the abstract, for cultural reasons, because in this opening toward design I saw a new, open culture that would address the new design realities, but I cared also because it was, since the founding of the Politecnico, the only true innovation of the Ateneo: to go from two to three Faculties [3](#). (Stevan, 2023)**



**3. Cesare Stevan,  
Professore Emerito del  
Politecnico di Milano.  
[Document](#) →**

These are also the years in which the *Cultura tecnologica del progetto* [Technological Culture of Design], cultivated by figures such as Giuseppe Ciribini (Ciribini, 1995) and Enzo Frateili (Frateili, 1991), whose thinking had great influence on design pedagogy, played a decisive role of linkage among technology, architectural design, and industrial design.

When Alberto Seassaro set in motion the process of founding the Faculty of Design, the student body had grown to the thousands, the dequalification of the figure of the *technical architect* had entered an advanced phase, and the *proletarianization of intellectuals*, analyzed

in the 1970 document as a possible condition for the spread of an anti-capitalist consciousness, was becoming tainted by the new climate of cultural restoration of the 1990s. These were the years in which, with the entry into force of the *new ordinance*, in response to Directive 85/384 defining the competencies of the European architect, the *Laboratori di costruzione dell'architettura* [Laboratories of Architectural Construction] were instituted within the Faculties of Architecture, composed of multiple integrated modules with lead instructors drawn from the area of *Tecnologia dell'architettura* [Architectural Technology] belonging to SSD ICAR/12.

In September 1995 the first national meeting, coordinated by Nicola Sinopoli, on the results of the laboratories (Tatano, 1996) was held in Venice, with the task of comparing the experiences conducted in the various sites. Representing Milan were the instructors affiliated with the DiTec Department, heir to the old PPPE Department; they were responsible for *Progettazione di sistemi costruttivi* [Design of Construction Systems], the course characterizing the laboratory, integrated by a module in *Architectural Design* and one in *Structural Design*. I am of the view (based only on circumstantial elements) that Alberto Seassaro judged it inopportune to *Industrial Design* into the Construction Laboratories, so as to avert the danger of ending up performing a *service role* to *Architectural Technology*, at the very moment when he already had in hand the cards to set in motion the process of

**Note 4.** recognizing Design as a scientific-disciplinary sector autonomous from ICAR 12 [4v](#).

ICAR 12 and ICAR 13 remain associated within competition sector SC 08/1.

What happened at the end of the century is well known. If we reconsider the contents of the 1970 documents, it is easy to think that the project of the *Design System*, composed of Faculty, Consortium, and Department, represents an educational offering intended to address problems, from the dequalification of the figure of the architect to the need for a radical change in the competences required of the designer, already identified at the time, and to institutionalize their embryonic proposals. It is an idea of design that goes well beyond what is commonly understood as industrial product design, and in which one finds the project experimentations carried out with Ugo La Pietra in the 1960s, the studies on *Morfemi*, the research on the relationship between art and science, installation projects, and a deep familiarity

with the art world, all of which confer on it the character of a discipline with a high content of innovation and transcultural resonances. A mix of components that enter into the project of a School of Design, a place of education altogether original with respect to those existing worldwide in the field of design, and in which technique is regarded as the support for a critical mode of thought committed to changing the way we live, work, and inhabiting.

**Figure 1.**  
Book presentation by Ugo La Pietra (2009). From left in the photo: Beppe Finessi, Gillo Dorfles, Ugo La Pietra, Arturo Dell'Acqua Bellavitis, Luciano Crespi, Alberto Seassaro.



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